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ABSTRACT

The expansion of field-based preparation for teachers in recent years has been driven by several factors. The satisfaction of university students and instructors participating in site-based instruction and the encouragement of local schools seeking reform themselves have refueled this expansion. In a site-based course, preservice teachers provide working models of real teaching and authentic responsibilities for working with elementary students. One such course was a required Language Arts and Reading Methods for Elementary Teachers. The first 3 weeks of class were on campus and the remaining 11 weeks at a public elementary school near campus. Because the college class met before elementary students arrived each day, teachers were able to make a variety of presentations to the college students. Preservice teachers regularly spent a 30-minute stint in the second-grade classrooms, and each produced a children's book as part of the class. This site-based instruction created a dynamic teaching and learning experience. (CR)

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Evolution of a Partnership: Situating Preservice Literacy Methods Instruction in a Public School

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The purpose of this session is to describe a particular university/public school relationship. The topics to be discussed are the rationale, the logistics, and the results of moving a literacy methods course to an elementary school. For two years now I have been placing students enrolled in college courses in the classrooms of one specific elementary school for field work. For three of these semesters, I taught one of the courses, a literacy methods course, on site.

A Short Research Base

The expansion of field-based preparation for teachers in recent years has been driven by several factors. This practice first picked up outside of the United States (Hawkey, 1995) in countries where apprenticeship programs prepare highly skilled artisans. The Holmes Group in this country encouraged universities to reexamine their programs of teacher preparation with a focus on the linking of theory and practice (Cooper, 1996). The satisfaction of university students and instructors participating in site-based instruction and the encouragement of local schools seeking reform themselves, has also fueled this expansion. (Wilmore, 1996).

The strengthening of professional ties between the university and the public school provides the preservice teacher with a deeper appreciation of the place of each. The strongest benefit to the university student in school based teacher education programs seems to be an acceleration of the shift of focus from self to student. As the university student comes to know children as learners at an earlier time in their own education, they come to understand teaching as related as strongly to learners as to content knowledge and strategies.

An Overview

The partnership described here was first arranged. A colleague had successfully piloted a site-based literacy methods course in 1993-94, at an elementary school adjacent to the university campus. Although the course has historically included field experience at this university, by meeting at the elementary school where the field experience was provided the university professor was able to observe and participate in the students' learning in a more organic way. I was to copy this example at a second local school. I met in the spring of 1994 with the principal of the participating school and initiated informal arrangements to accomplish this.

The principal of the participating school had changed by fall, but the agreement was honored and this second site-based program established for 1994-1995. The literacy methods course had long included both a micro-teaching component and a field experience. Offering the class on site did not change this, but it did change the configuration of the hours devoted to the course. All of the field experience hours were scheduled contiguously with the exception of one floating hour which the students scheduled on their own in the classroom to which they were assigned. Generally, the students met in class with me from 8:00 to 9:30 and then spent an hour in the assigned elementary classrooms. I circulated throughout the classrooms during the last hour, observing, assisting and conferring as possible and as needed.

The Particulars

What course was this?

This course was a required undergraduate Language Arts and Reading Methods for Elementary Teachers, a six credit block. It is a required course for undergraduate as well as post graduate students seeking elementary education certification.

Where was the course offered?

The first three weeks of class were offered on campus and the remaining eleven weeks at a public elementary school three miles from the university campus. This is a new suburban school and was able to provide a classroom for delivering the university portion of the course as well as the elementary classrooms for field experience.

Who was involved in this site based course?

One section of the university course (15-25 students per semester), the staff of one K-5 elementary school which included eleven classroom teachers and approximately 300 students , and one university instructor were involved daily with this course. The entire elementary school staff provided support to the university personnel as was appropriate and useful. The Field Experience Office of the Department of Education also provided guidance and support for this partnership.

When was the course scheduled?

The course was blocked for three hours, 8:00-10:50, Monday through Wednesday for a 14 week semester. The first two-three weeks of the semester, this time was spent on the university campus in a regular classroom setting. The remainder of the semester was spent on site at the elementary school. There the students worked with me from 8:00-9:30 each morning and then worked in their assigned classroom from 9:30 -10:30. School began for the children at 9:00. A short flux time 10:30-10:40 was used variously from semester to semester and student to student. The location of the school necessitated the inclusion of travel time in the schedule to accommodate the next scheduled hour of class on campus.

How were these arrangements made?

All arrangements were made verbally, with the willing participation of the elementary school staff and the college instructor. Initiatives came from both. The principal of the school was instrumental in setting the tone for this collaboration. The value to all participants was discussed and addressed, with special attention to the ways this site-based class would benefit the students, both university and elementary.

The Special Opportunities

The generic value of a site-based course is quite straightforward. Preservice teachers are provided working models of real teaching and authentic responsibilities for working with elementary students. The added value of teaching a university methods course on site is generated in the process. The life of the school and the collegial atmosphere produce the particular opportunities. As I worked and taught in this school I discovered and promoted a number of special opportunities for the preservice teachers.

Because the college class met before elementary students arrived each day, teachers were able to make a variety of presentations to the college students. Various teachers shared their expertise on teaching the writing of poetry, on working with the special population of inclusion, on assisting the child to find his voice when writing, on using

puppets. Other teachers participated in panels and answered all sorts of questions the students put to them about teaching. Over the three semesters this class met at the school an effort was made to include all teachers and not simply establish a repeat performance each semester. The teacher presentations grew out of the interests and needs of the specific semester's students. In addition to the teachers, two student teachers who were working in the building made powerful presentations to the university students during two different semesters, providing advice only a peer could do as convincingly .

The most comprehensive of the opportunities was a regular, 30 minute stint in the second grade classrooms. At first every other week, but soon, every week, the preservice teachers went into the two second grade classrooms. Each was assigned two or three students and they became a working group for the duration of the semester. The classroom teachers and I worked out the guidelines for this time, beginning with a real-time pen pal exchange, trying a collaborative story creation and the final semester, a reading enhancement alternating the use of expository and fictional material. This experience not only gave the preservice teachers responsibility for planning and teaching a mini-lesson, it provided an opportunity to observe, assess and address the ongoing specific literacy needs of a few real children. This time was taken from the college class time (9:00-9:30).

Several opportunities came to individual students. For example, one found himself the focus of a prominent display case when a teacher showcased the art work he had produced with her class. Others arranged to go on field trips with their assigned classes. The fifth grade science teacher needed assistants when using pig plucks and several students were able to stay after hours to do this.

The preservice teachers each produced a children's book as part of the class. They were able to share these in various ways.

Perhaps the most exciting of the special opportunities came when the library clerk asked if the students would be willing to tell stories for Book Week. They were willing and exceedingly able. They prepared stories, based on books, in small groups using any mode they preferred. Acting, dramatic retelling and puppets were the chosen mediums. The morning of the storytelling all other activities for the university students were canceled and they became the NMU Players, repeating performances until all the school's children had viewed each production. The heartfelt response and the thank you notes from the children and the teachers provided one more literacy lesson to these college students.

The Conditions of Success

A number of factors contributed to the success of this site-based course. The willingness of all classroom teachers to accept preservice teachers in their classrooms was foremost. The students were assigned to a classroom where they stayed for the semester, allowing them to see the growth of students and participate in the life of the classroom. The preservice teachers were placed as partners whenever possible, giving them a peer with whom to share reflections and planning responsibilities. I was able to confer regularly if not daily with all teachers.

The atmosphere was completely professional. Not only were teachers willing to come into the university class (and able to do so because of the class and school schedules) to share their expertise they were actively collaborating with me to shape

the course. This was particularly the case with the second grade project, but was also true with their work with individual preservice teachers in the various classrooms. The university students continually received pertinent suggestions as well as comments of appreciation for the work they were doing.

The university class was always provided a private room in which to meet and a safe place for storage of materials. The greatest physical challenge was to avoid the choice parking places. The whole staff welcomed the students and myself, assisting us with menial and major needs. We were made to feel a part of the school.

Blocking the course contact hours with the field work hours was seen as a definite logistical advantage by the students. For me, the addition of work hours at the site provided the opportunity to actually see, first hand, the university students as they interacted with elementary students. I could work, plan and conference with them more easily. I also came to know the classroom teachers and their interests, styles and strengths. This has been of considerable ongoing value to me.

The Results

A number of positive results occurred as the result of this site-based course. Teachers were able to request student teachers on the basis of their experiences with particular students. A number of students continued to volunteer at the school after they had completed the course.

I found it easier to drop and add information and assignments to the course. As the work of the course was attached to practice, its dynamic nature became more clear to me. As college classroom time was limited, I began to strongly value the power of partner and group collaboration, linking it to the development of a collegial, professional attitude.

This section of the literacy block was suspended because of enrollment. However, the school currently serves as the field base for a different preservice course, my premethods educational psychology course. All teachers accepted premethods students for this practicum when they had the opportunity. This is not a site-based class, but that possibility is under discussion.

In Conclusion

The success of this site-based course came from the willingness of all persons involved (a) to take risks, and try out new configurations and possibilities in teaching and learning, (b) to grasp opportunity when it appeared, (c) to take responsibility for initiating teaching and learning activities, and (d) to respect differences and expect to learn from them.

This site-based instruction created a truly dynamic teaching and learning experience. When I spoke with the principal recently about the value of the program for his school he was, as ever, supportive of the opportunity for teachers to "give back" to the profession. He is justly proud of the teachers in his school and realizes that this was, and is, a way for them to magnify their influence in the profession. He added that this opportunity to share in such a variety of ways over a semester was empowering for the teachers. This, I believe, is the key to the success of this site-based learning. It provides a rich, non-threatening, professional context for the learning of the whole community.

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